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ABSTRACT

This paper is a presentation of a 10-year experiment in multimedia distance learning in English for specific purposes within the general framework of a 3-year management diploma in the French higher education system. It defines, analyzes, and rationalizes key elements in the technical evolution against a background of epistemological and present didactic academic standards gleaned from literature scanning. The student population is described, and the roles of students and teachers are examined. The content of the national curriculum and the tools used are discussed. An overview of the milestones of the experiment is given, pinpointing some successes to adopt and pitfalls to avoid. (MES)

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Ten Years on: Assessing Multimedia Distance-Learning

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Abstract: This paper is a presentation of a 10-year experiment in multimedia distance learning in English for specific purposes within the general frame of a 3-year management diploma in the French higher education system. It defines analyses and rationalises key elements in the technical evolution against a background of epistemological and present didactic academic standards gleaned from literature scanning. An overview of the milestones of the experiment is given pinpointing some successes to adopt and pitfalls to avoid.

Introduction

This paper is a presentation of a 10-year experiment in multimedia distance learning in English for specific purposes within the general frame of a 3-year management diploma: Diplôme Universitaire de Technologie en Gestion des Entreprises et Administrations.The Instituts Universitaires de Technologie – IUTs- where it takes place, are institutions of higher education within the French university system that lead to a professional degree. Over 100 IUTs account for about 10% of the student population in France. Each IUT has several departments corresponding to different technological specialities in the secondary and tertiary sectors of the economy. This multimedia project was first launched by the French Ministry of higher education in 1989 in 4 experimental IUTs as an alternative to the traditional studies. The range of available multimedia tools was very narrow at that time which led us to focus primarily on the pedagogical shifts induced by the introduction of both distance and emerging multimedia tools. Since its launching in 1989 the tools have evolved at a tremendous speed and what was considered in the first years as a long-term objective turned into actual effective, ready-to use instruments within a very short span of time. We had to navigate between pedagogical conceptual constructions, highly sophisticated, not really user-friendly tools and real life students. While technology was evolving we have always maintained a flexible system in which the students may avail themselves of analog or digitalised materials according to their needs and capacities. In this paper we will attempt to define, analyse and rationalise key elements in the technical evolution against a background of epistemological and present didactic academic standards gleaned from literature scanning. The general term of «multimedia» refers to tools as well as contents and practices. We will review what it represents in the context of our courses in connection with the various underlying models of learning and their associated strategies as well as the field of second-language acquisition. Our ultimate aim is to provide the teachers engaged in or envisaging off line and on line distance multimedia teaching with an overview concerning: the technological evolution of IT tools, their didactic and pedagogical added value and the problem of the assessment of students' work.

The General Frame of The Experiment

The nation-wide project presented here was first launched in 1989 by the French Ministry. It consisted, in fact in, a mere injunction from the hierarchy to field practitioners to try and set up an innovative distance training using « multimedia » tools in Business Administration. Similar projects were also run in speciality departments in the secondary sector.

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It was opened to both initial and adult students. The official national curriculum was re-shaped into a set of 9 credits corresponding to the main fields of study, each one split into 3 modules, one for each year (cf. http://www.geapx.iut-tlse3.fr/programme.htm). The studies were organised into alternate distance learning periods of 2 weeks and one in-site regroupment day every other week. In the case of our IUT, -which is presented here- Resource Centres were set up in 3 cities situated in a radius of 80km from Toulouse. 3 years ago a fouth was added and we now have another one within the university itself. These resource centres are accommodated in different types of institutions such as Chambers of Commerce, vocational centres, university distant-branches, etc. They provide the students with communication and pedagogical hardware and software material. This experimental program has dealt so far with a limited number of Students. Over 1,000 students have since graduated from the various IUTs involved in the project (approx. 100 from Toulouse)
This paper deals more specifically with the teaching of English.

Who are our students?

The student population is very heterogeneous in age, social and educational background and life environment. Some are high-school leavers; others have already been in the work-market for years. Accordingly their initial training in English, can still be very vivid but frequently very "bookish" or reduced to a blurred souvenir. Worse they very regularly suffer from a common nation-wide so-called « French inability to master foreign languages ». The picture is not always as black as it may seem here but it is true to say that there is a wide discrepancy in the students' minds between the mitigated image they have of English and the nearly inescapable obligation to master it in the global exchange and communication environment they live and work in. This psychological aspect is also present in traditional language classes but quite often buried under routine teaching strategies. Because of large numbers of students and the relatively small amount of time devoted to language learning, it is widely assumed that the class must globally adjust to a theoretical average student's pace. It consequently tends to lose the attention of the quicker and slower ones who, put together, may amount to the majority, if not sometimes the whole class.

Since distance implies remoteness, for the same number of students as in a traditional classroom , a distance learning scheme results naturally in individualisation. The dark side of it can be isolation but it can also permit individualised counselling and hence a real learner-centred training. This was an opportunity we spotted from the very beginning of the project. The entire curriculum was designed with a view to holding together the official curriculum requests with - and not at the expense of - the genuine interests and needs of the learners. We contend with Philips (1987) that « the language to be learnt must correspond to actual pragmatic needs to the learner ».

Their role and ours in the light of theory

On a purely theoretical cognitive level we are in favour of a balance between the generative and the constructivist learning theories. We do believe that « the learning process is not so much the result of an accumulation of layers of knowledge brought in from outside as the progressive elaboration of a personal inner object of knowledge » (Fijalkow, 1996). Referring to Vygotski (1985) he claims that it is therefore a non-linear, discontinued process that we view as not merely fuelled from ready-made outside pedagogical sources but by the learner's output feedback.

Therefore to us, the teacher's role is to constantly adapt and re-inject materials tailored with or according to the learner's own production. This is in tune with Von Glasersfeld (1989) who stresses that learning is basically a process of discrimination. We fully support that: « [Thus] the preferred current strategy [...] is that once learners have absorbed some chunks of language and patterns of communication, they should be given access to the underlying model via a guided discovery approach that uses both learner-controlled exploration and teacher-controlled demonstration ». (Scrimshaw 1993, p147).

The real challenge/opportunity in multimedia distance learning is to take advantage of both distance and technology: distance as a means of responsibility and introspection on the learner's part on the one hand, Information Technology as a powerful means of communication and tutored progression, on the other hand. This implies that students are able to manage their learning progress in an autonomous way. Very early in the project, it became apparent that it was not the case for a large majority of students. A new methodological

module was set up which proved to be absolutely necessary and evolved over the years from a short ½ day quite informal meeting to a very structured one-week session.

Contents

This National curriculum covers the four language skills: oral and written comprehension and expression applied to social and professional situations. The scope is much too wide to be met within the 3 modules. We therefore selected some priority sub-objectives according to the students' needs as follows:

- Checking and up-grading grammatical competence
- Improving aural comprehension
- Training in oral expression and production
- Training in specific BA language
- Restoring or building a positive socio-linguistic approach to English

These language skill objectives are spread over the 3-year span of the studies. They are embedded so to speak in different tasks and different tools (cf. table 1). Levy (1997) reports that 2 studies by Robinson et al. (1985) and Verano (1987) conclude that « [These findings] highlight the importance of integrating individual CALL work with the total program of language instruction, including the classroom, rather than configuring it as an independent, supplementary activity ». It is all the more true in our case where the classroom is so called virtual », except for the regroupment sessions. It implies that the pedagogical contents of the tools available to the students cannot merely « illustrate » our academic knowledge delivery since there is none. They are both, in their contents, form and interactivity, « the » knowledge to be grasped and encoded by self-reliant students.

Tools

Since its launching in 1989 the available tools have evolved at a tremendous speed and what was considered in the first years as a long-term objective turned into actual effective, ready-to use instruments within a very short span of time. We had to navigate between pedagogical conceptual constructions, highly sophisticated, not really user-friendly tools and real life students. While technology was evolving we have always maintained a flexible system in which the students may avail themselves of analog or digitalised materials according to their needs and capacities.

Starting from a total lack of digital medium, we have been through the era of floppy disks to diskettes, non-recordable then recordable CD Roms, and eventually DVDs, from mere fax machines to present high speed communication tools on the Internet.

The tools we are currently using are non-modifiable commercial educational software (Web English, Mediaconcept-Citcom) other commercial applications not specifically designed for educational purposes (Finance for non-financing managers), authoring tools enabling the digitalisation of existing teaching materials such as audio and video recordings used over networks (Intra and Inter) or on standalone machines (Lavac)[1], synchronous and asynchronous communication tools via intranet and internet, university-designed Web site as well as free Internet site educational facilities such as conferencing, document posting, class schedule, class administration, etc. One can also mention the use of survey or polling software turned into exercise processors. Videoconference is also available although not very much used and MOOs are envisaged.

We basically remain teachers and we are qualified to design our own course. According to the theory we exposed earlier it is evident that we are in favour of tools which enable us to adjust the program to the needs of our learners and of ourselves. We differentiate the guided autonomous learning we are engaged in, from self-instruction, which excludes the presence of a teacher. In our case we are in constant exchange process (either synchronously or a-synchronously) with our students and it is essential that a large number of the tools we use be flexible enough to, in a way, comply with our requirements.

We have always tried to keep up with the technology evolution with one notable restriction. As a matter of fact is it absolutely essential that all the students have access to the same tools. This means that we sometimes cannot use new ones, which offer more interesting services just because they are not compatible with

[1] Lavac is a rare example of an authoring system primarily devised and designed by a language teacher.Toma (1996)

one or several resource centres' configurations. Some students may also have lower configurations at home whether in terms of machines or telecommunication connections. In short that means that very sophisticated equipment has to be left aside for practical everyday reasons. (Tab. 1)

Language & Professional Skills / Language Learning Tools	Grammar	Aural comprehension	English for management	Oral Production	Oral expression	Business simulation
Web site: Web English	×✓△			×✓△		
Course book	×✓△	×✓△	×✓△			
Audio cassettes		×✓△	×✓△	×✓△		
Video cassettes		×✓△	×✓△			
Web site: electronic course book	×✓△	×✓△	×✓△			
Purpose designed interactive CAL packages	×✓△	×✓△	×✓△			
Videodisk						△
Audio recording on tapes				✓△	△	
Video recording on tapes					✓	
Purpose designed interactive CAL CD ROM		×✓△	×✓△	×✓△		

Table 1 : Correspondance between language learning tools and language and professional skills
× year 1 ✓year 2 △ year 3

The assessment problem

Another difficulty is the processing of the bulk of data we receive from the various tools concerning our students' progression. Some charts are totally useless. Others are too detailed and it requires both methodology and organisation to spot the accurate information. Not to mention the flow of questions, reactions or mere information mailed by the students themselves. Still, it is essential to keep in mind that every student expects his or her « personal » teacher to be available and caring. This is a big change from our previous experience in the traditional French education system which has always been mainly teacher-centred. Even though active pedagogical theories have been put into practice over the last decades thanks to precursors like Montessori, Piaget, La Garanderie or Trocmé-Fabre it is true to say that learners throughout the system have remained somewhat passive and the introduction of distance combined with I.T usage has definitively given them a better command of their learning process and therefore more efficiency.

We have not yet solved the problem of Examination Paper Structure. The official system of evaluation requires everybody to take the same subject and to be evaluated against the same criteria. We encourage students to take a positive look at their language training regardless of their previous experiences, and to work at their own pace. We cannot therefore expect every one of them to attain a theoretical common level of proficiency by the end of year 2. The examination is rather an opportunity to demonstrate what they have learnt during their study of the course, whatever « what » is. We can see how much a student has worked and it is fairly easy to assess the quantity and quality, but the mark given doesn't necessarily reflect the level of language proficiency. The electronic submission of assignments still poses problems. The traditional system has not yet evolved to fit new methods of teaching and learning.

Conclusion

Possibilities appear everyday and we believe that as teachers, it is our role to keep up with technological evolution in order to ascertain that students benefit from these tremendous capabilities without losing academic content value. It is also our contention that if it is the teacher's role to choose the appropriate tools and media according to his or her teaching goals as well as the students' needs, this is all the more true as

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regards the design of his or her own multimedia courseware. It is also absolutely essential to say that strong support services are critical to success and that new rules must be set up to organise the collaboration between professionals who have never before worked together on such terms.

Teachers are often said to be afraid of being replaced by machines. That might well happen if technology remained in the hands of commercial businesses. But our experience, among others, proves quite the contrary when they are used as support for strong pedagogical theories.

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